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ABSTRACT

In recent years, community colleges have made concerted efforts to reach out and meet the needs of the communities they serve. Relevance in community college education depends upon the successful identification of individual and social needs and the implementation of responsive programs. As a basis for conducting a community needs assessment, the goals of the college, as well as the principles and assumptions on which these goals rest must be identified; this necessitates the formulation of an operational philosophy of education. Once an operational philosophy of education is established, data from the community must be collected and analyzed. The process of data analysis must compare community concerns with present policies, with large discrepancies indicating validated needs. The second step of the community needs assessment is converting needs into viable programs. Critical factors which influence successful implementation are the extent of community involvement in the needs assessment, way the college is governed and administered. (Author/AH)

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"Identification of Assessment of Needs"

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The dynamism of the Community College movement, in its recent development, is characterized by flexibility and a reaching out to meet the needs of the community. Its relative newness, at least in the vast numbers of colleges and enrollments within the past decade, calls for a good-hard look at where it's at, where it's going, and how it ought to proceed.

In this connection the conversation from Alice in Wonderland between Alice and the "Cheshire-Puss" is instructive. Alice asked, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," answered the cat.

When Alice went on to explain that she did not much care where she went, the cat interrupted her to say that it did not really matter, then, which path she took. But Alice protested, "... so long as I get somewhere." If all she wanted to do was to get somewhere, the cat pointed out that it was no serious problem; that if only she walked long enough, she was bound to get somewhere.

The cat's logic is misleading. Alice could end up nowhere. She could, conceivably, cover the countryside only to end up back where she started. Or, she could do worse.

Recognizing Alice's kind of predicament as possibly being their own, many educators in Community Colleges as well as in other areas of adult education, subscribe today, at least in theory, to a needs approach to education. They believe that "an effective program of adult education should consider the needs and related interests of the adult learner and attempt to discover and meet his real needs as well as the needs of his social order." (2:141)

Real needs are not the same as felt needs.

> The real need is a desirable element or condition that is lacking in, and would improve, a situation. Felt needs are what people with problems recognize as the elements necessary to improve their situations. It would be emphasized that felt needs may also be real needs, but that often they are not. Felt needs may be derived from symptoms alone rather than from true problems. (7:11)

"If you would know the needs and interest of your students, know the community." (3:27)

"Personal needs do not operate in a vacumm; they are shaped, conditioned, and channeled by the social structures and forces of the human society in which each individual is born. Each of us is driven by survival needs, but the survival behavior of a primitive hunting tribesman is far different from that of the organization man in western industrial society." (9:3)

There are, to be sure, community needs apart from the needs of individuals, and there are such things as community pressures. But, we must still look at the community to determine educational needs.

> Blackwell has identified seven interrelated dimensions of the community. He emphasized that they were not watertight compartments and stressed the dynamic nature of the community. He urged that the dimensions be considered only in a framework of social change. His seven points were the following:
>
> 1. The population base. In his words, "If we are to understand the community, we need to know something about the human raw material that makes it up. Who are thepeople, what about their age and sex composition?" He pointed, also, to racial characteristics, educational level, mobility within the city, and migration.
>
> 2. The institutional structure of the community. This he identified as "the complex web of organized soical relationships which people have created in order to help them better meet their needs." He mentioned families, agencies, business and industry, the pressure groups, the civic organizations, and other special interest groups.

3. The value systems. He referred to the value systems of the people, the things that they hold dear, the things that are high on their priority rating in that community. He ponted to such qualitites as neighborliness, hospitality, attitude toward government and its function and their rating of security.

4. Social stratification. This he identified as the way society layers the people according to range and prestige.

5. Informal social relationships. He expressed the belief that the pattern of the network of interpersonal relationships is extremely important. He differentiated this characteristic from the organized institutional structure and made particular reference to certain informal leaders who help mold opinion. He suggested thar the informal networks are what we often refer to as the grapevine.

6. The power structure of the community. He spoke of the "individuals behind the scenes who pull the strings that make things happen or can block things from happening in our communities."

7. The ecology of the community. He defined the ecology as "the spacious distribution of people and these other social aspects of the community, the way the community has been divided up in terms of functions, particularly social and economic functions." (8:16, 17)

I'm using the word "community" in a very loose sense to include a specific population which the community college seeks to reach with respect to its goals. "The community may be the people in a single apartment house or on a city block. It may be the people in a voting district. It may be the entire population of a municipality or of a region... The technical definition is not important; the important notion is that of the total group of people whose lives are affected by the problem." (8:4)

"The major purpose for adult education programs, then, becomes that of meeting the real educational needs of individuals, groups, institutions, and communities, and the needs of the society of which each is a part." (1:141)

The conviction that needs assessment is critical has led many educators in Community Colleges to ask how they can better assess needs. Their concern and their quest for this kind of expertise is both admirable and encouraging, but the most critical question is not "how." The more important question they should be asking themselves is "why." "Why a needs assessment?"

It may appear somewhat naive to suggest asking the question, "Why a needs assessment?" Up until quite recently, I would have agreed that asking that question was naive. I no longer consider asking "Why a needs assessment?" to be very naive in the light of my experience with a group of community college faculty members.

I was working with two dozen community college teachers and administrators who were trying to do a needs assessment for their institution. They, as I, thought it would be a relatively simple and easy process. It turned out to be a painful and drawn-out effort mainly because they did not have a cogent notion of an operational philosophy of their college. They thought they would be able to turn to the college catalog description, but were surprised, then disappointed, and finally somewhat discouraged by what they found. Eventually they had to begin formulating an operational philosophy themselves before they could get on with

their needs assessment. They realized that they could not do a needs assessment without knowing what the goals of the college were as well as the principles and assumptions on which these goals were based.

The "operational philosophy" I refer to "should be a dynamic, practical instrument that is used periodically or continuously for making decisions on school matters at all organizational levels and by all personnel." (4:20)

Understood in this way, an operational philosophy of education may be somewhat different from what ordinarily passes for an operational philosophy. It seems that there is a need to change our ideas about the characteristics of an operational philosophy of education if it is to measure up to the requirements as I spelled them out.

Some have described a new concept of an operational philosophy as a "value bank." The "value bank" is analogous to a "data bank" in storage of information and facts. Just as data banks and instant communication devices have replaced annual reports as baseline data, so too, dynamic "value banks" must replace the "once-per-decade" officially adapted statements of educational philosophy. That is, "value banks" must be adapted if there is to be a basis for sound educational policies and decisions.

The reluctance of some individuals to become involved in the determination of an "operational philosophy" is understandable, although inexcusable. It is understandable because it means trying to change an institution. John Gardner has observed that "you can't change institutions unless you're willing to talk about details, unless you're really willing to dig in and learn some basic realities about the institutions you hope to change. And very few social critics want to go to that trouble. It's tiresome, it's boring, it means you have to do some homework." (5)

It is inexcusable because anyone who is part of an institution has a responsibility to try to bring about the changes that are required to keep the institution in concert with its goals, or to change those goals.

My statements up to this point have been made on the assumption that an institution already exists. If it were a case of starting up a new institution, an operational philosophy would have to be formulated, perhaps after a needs assessment had been conducted. In either instance we are back to the "how" of needs assessment.

NEEDS IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

As soon as you begin thinking about conducting a needs assessment, several procedural questions arise. For example, who should be involved in the process of determining needs? Whose needs? How does one go about determining these needs? And what mechanisms should be used?

The answers to some of these questions will be partly answered when you have determined "why" you're undertaking a needs assessment. The rest of the answers will depend on a number of constraints such as time and resources.

Needs assessment is supposed to discover gaps -- gaps between the current circumstances and the desired circumstances. Needs assessment is aimed at discovering and locating gaps in knowledge, competence, and maybe even commitment, as well as the decisions of how to go about filling those gaps. "Simplistically, the difference between what a person should know and do and what he actually does know and do indicates an educational need." (6:146)

A major part, then, of a needs assessment is gathering data. There are only three basic ways I know of how you can collect needs data: 1) You can ask and listen; 2) You can look and listen; and 3) You can study other available data.

Ask and listen. You can ask verbally or through a written instrument. You can conduct personal interviews with individuals or groups; you can administer paper-and-pencil questionnaires in person or by mail; and you can ask questions printed in newspapers, magazines, or shown on television.

Look and listen. This category refers to observation. You can observe what is going on in the community by taking a walk around the community; or read the local newspapers, including advertisements, job opportunities, and the social column; or look at the kinds of businesses and industries located in and around the community; or you can look at the schools, the religious denominations served by churches and synagogues; or the recreational patterns of the community; or the cultural offerings. You can also listen to what people talk about most often -- for most of us tend to talk about what is uppermost on our minds.

Study the data. There is a lot of information about the community already compiled and available to you. For example, there are census data, economic stateistics, labor statistics, history of the community, and a whole range of literature including educational catalogs, brochures and leaflets describing programs for adults in places such as colleges, churches, YM and YWCAs and community centers.

In gathering data, the major elements to look at would include the historical background of a community: its physical setting; population characteristics; economic structure; functional operations; institutional structure; value system; social stratification; power structure; and ecological patterns.

Such a data gathering process will help you identify the general characteristics of the community; the general needs of the community; and many specific characteristics and needs of individuals. You may have to devise and use several strategies to effectvely identify the needs, since many needs are unrecognized.

Once these concerns have been collected you must classify them in order to analyze them. The analysis process will provide a large repository of useful values, policies, and facts that are essential for the screening process.

This is the point to check for adequacy and integrity of the data. A simple checklist for adequacy might include three questions: What is (present time)? What could be (present time)? and What can be (future time with technology trends and information explosion)?

A check on the integrity of facts might ask the following questions: What are the facts surrounding the present condition? Have the facts been carefully separated from assumptions? Are the data free from any unintended bias? and Is the evidence objective?

Once you have collected, classified, and checked the data for their adequacy and integrity you are ready to analyze them. This consists of selecting the educational needs you want to change. Putting it another way, you must set priorities in a rational systematic way, replacing guesses, intuitions, hunches, or speical interests by the use of thoughtfully designed criteria based upon objective data.

The analysis of data follows a sort of "match-mismatch" process to identify descrepencies or inconsistencies among the concerns of the participants or potential participants, as well as others. These discrepencies or inconsistencies will constitute validated needs. Essentially this is a winnowing process where you systematically apply evaluated criteria -- values, policies, and facts -- to each of the collected concerns or needs. Very often this is the weakest link in the chain of events by which needs are appraised. Ultimately, the chief criterion of effectiveness of the procedures used to collect and analyze data must be in the utilization of results.

"When institutional goals, societal goals, and learner goals are brought into congruence, a climate for learning is created. Without this congruence concerted action toward the longer goal is not possible." (6:148)

The indispensable step in creating a conducive climate for learning is assessing needs -- individual needs of learners and potential learners, as well as the needs of the community. With these needs you must mesh the goals of the community college in its operational philosophy and the concerns of the faculty and administration of the college. The needs assessment is a necessary and perhaps first step, but it is not sufficient by itself.

CONVERTING NEEDS INTO PROGRAMS

Needs assessment is supposed to discover gaps for the purpose of assisting in making decisions. It ought to serve to secure better curricula. Knowing the needs of participants and potential participants ought to lead toward the development of better programs.

Implementing identified needs is closely linked to two factors -- one of these is the extent of community involvement in the needs assessment process, and secondly, the issue of governance in the community college.

If you had involved a large segment of the community in your needs assessment you could turn to them for help in mounting and conducting some programs. For example, some of the health delivery agencies might be able to help with clinical opportunities as well as specialized facilities. Business and industry people might be willing to provide you with some instructors if they perceive that the program, based on their needs input, will rpoduce the kind of workers they are seeking. Both of these examples are actual instances where such arrangements resulted from needs assessments community colleges conducted in these agencies.

The second, and perhaps the more important factor from a realistic standpoint, is the way the community college is governed and administered. Governance in community college is not very different from what you might find in four year colleges and universities. What you can expect to find is a whole variety of styles ranging from autocratic through democratic leadership/administration. In community colleges, there is a new thrust developing towards greater involvement by faculty and students, partly because of the more democratic approach through the open door policy of admissions and partly because of the growing unionization among community college faculties.

Where students and faculty are involved in the governance of a community college a constant and immediate feedback mechanism is available at all stages of implementing needs. Faculty and students, along with the administration aided by representatives from the community can participate: in prioritizing needs; converting needs into goals and into component objectives and tasks; and in evaluation of the needs assessment, the attainment of objectives, and the overall effectiveness of the program.

In converting needs into programs you must provide for the following: estimate the cost of each goal and its component objectives and tasks; examine each goal in terms of payoff and risks; rank order each need goal for assigning available or obtainable budget funds; and follow through on mounting the program using the usual channels of marketing, advertising, enrollment, deliver, and evaluation.

The best needs assessment/implementation models provide for communication to those who provided input to the needs inventory, of actions planned as a result of the findings. This kind of feedback mechanism provides not only some measure of potential evaluation, but also some insurance of cooperation in future needs assessments. And, further needs assessments will be necessary since needs are not static.

There ought to be a rational base to any needs assessment model; there ought to be a flow from finding, to planning, to implementing, to observable output. The last category calls for evaluation as an on-going part of the program.

The evaluation process ought to include at least the following categories:

1. The Product -- the identified needs;
2. The Process -- the method for determining the needs and the method for validating them;
3. Management -- those who manage the needs assessment as well as the goals of the management team;

4. Participation -- method of choosing those who will be involved in the needs assessment, the implementation, management, and evaluation of the entire process;

5. Communications -- understanding by administration, faculty, students, and community of purposes of the needs assessment process and notification of the results of the goal determiniation and development;

6. Resources -- sufficiency and adequacy of personnel, time, and money, as well worthwhileness of their expenditure on the results. (10:65,66)

A recapitualtion of the needs assessment and implemenation processes could be put in the form of questions that would go like this:

1. Formulate and enunciate philosophy:

   Who are you? What do you believe? Why do you plan? What will happen if you do not intervene?

2. Clarify the goals:

   What are you working towards?

3. Identify the needs:

   What are the gaps?

4. State the objectives:

   What specifically are you going to do? In what sequence? When?

5. Determine the scope and thrust of program:

   What are the available resources that can be used to implement the objectives? What financial base is required? Who will do what?

6. Assess obstacles and restraints:

   What will you do about them?

7. Evaluate and revise:

   How will you monitor and measure progress along the way? How will you feed new information for continued effectiveness of the program? How will you know that you have accomplished what you set out to do?

Conclusion

I have tried, in labored fashion and overlong form to sketch for you a needs identification and implementation process. To do that I have had to tell you more than you really wanted to know about operational philosophy and about community to fulfill the various steps of the process.

I consider these two elements crucial to an effective needs assessment for a community college. Without them a needs assessment will surely be inadequate; with them there is a greater chance of getting at the real needs of the individuals and of the community.

My presentation was meant to point out the steps in the process of identifying and inplementing needs based on the belief that to learn to bring relevance a step closer to reality in community college education.

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